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ABSTRACT

A quality circle approach was implemented at Valley Forge Military Junior College during two semesters of an American History survey course. Student input into the academic progress of the course was at the root of the quality circle experiment, with students determining the type and frequency of written assignments, course structure, the frequency and content of the lectures, and testing methods. Because students were unable to meet during lunch hours or evenings, the quality circle sessions were held in class, with all 11 to 12 students participating. Decisions made by the group resulted in the reduction of class time devoted to lectures and an increase in discussion time; a change in the location of the class to facilitate discussions; the use of essay examinations for grading; and the development of a class oral history project. In spite of the reservations of some students who felt that class time might be better spent in lecture or discussion than in quality circle meetings and initial reactions from students expecting and accustomed to a more highly structured environment, most students felt positive about the experiment. Benefits of the quality circle approach included an increase in classroom participation from 30% to 75%, increased seriousness of purpose among students, the encouragement of scholarship, and an improvement in student-teacher relations. (LL)

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THE QUALITY CIRCLE AND THE AMERICAN SURVEY: WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU CAN'T HAVE LUNCH

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Over the last three years, Americans have been made increasingly aware of the shortcomings of their former industrial giants and increasingly aware of the supposed superiority of the Japanese method of managing heavy and light industry. The national best-seller list has seen such books as Richard Pascale and Anthony Athos, The Art of Japanese Management.(Simon and Schuster, 1981) and William Ouchi's Theory Z: How American Business Can Meet the Japanese Challenge.(Addison-Wesley, 1981). Americans born before Sputnik still remember when "Made in Japan" was a synonym for the ersatz and 'chintzy'. American newspapers and weekly magazines are full of dire predictions that the last bastion of American technological supremacy, the micro-chip, is about to go the way of the American 35 millimeter camera, the steel industry and the automobile. Why the United States has slipped and what can be done about it is the subject of the aforementioned works. This paper will suggest that what we in the community and junior colleges can do about it is also found in those books. Specifically, one answer is found in the application of the Japanese Quality Circle technique to classroom instruction.

This paper will not go into those books in any great detail. Dr. Claire Hirshfield, of Penn State University - Ogontz Campus, has already touched upon the theoretically aspects of the Quality Circle technique. Rather, this paper will attempt to address the "nuts and bolts" of my attempt to bend a Japanese idea to the instruction of the American survey course.

Obviously, the application of the Quality Circle, QC, will never be quite the same in America as it is in Japan. It will probably not be as

rewarding in a classroom as it might be on an assembly line where a worker's suggestion might save thousands of dollars in production costs and add many thousands more in profits. What it will do, however, is assist the dissemination of historical knowledge, impart increased comprehension of historical thought and help develope a certain historical mindedness. Now, that seems like a large claim for something which is essentially an unknown quantity, but based on my six month use of the QC I would conclude that the use of it is its own best reward. It works, and almost any social scientist or liberal artist ought to be able to use it to good advantage.

When first presented with the idea for a Quality Circle my students knew nearly as much about it as I did. Seeing that they are students, or more correctly cadets, at one of the nation's six, military junior-colleges, they were somewhat skeptical. Most of the class were plebes, or freshmen, and as such had to be concerned with learning certain military methods and would have a somewhat divided attention span until the second week of October. At that time, they were "recognized" and became members of the Corps of Cadets, and the plebe training was officially ended. Therefore, when their professor told them that they, not he, would decide on the types of assignments, quizzes and tests, they were,frankly, taken aback.

As in the managerial and industrial application of the circle, input into the academic progress of the course was at the root of the QC experiment. The only thing that the instructor did was select the text and outside reading, after that the students were compelled to decide on the type and frequency of written work, the structure of the course, the frequency and even the content of the lectures. (The only instructor assigned work was a Chapter bibliography which I will go into in greater detail later in the paper.)

After receiving a preliminary syllabus, the class of twelve, slightly more than the optimum number, began a 'brainstorming' session concerning

the previously mentioned assignments. As practiced in the workplace, the circle would arrive at an agenda, in this case the method and type of coverage from Jamestown to Appomattox. What would happen? I felt that the only thing that stood between me and the wild-blue yonder was my yellow legal pad. Once I had finished describing the Quality Circle, the process began. A preliminary conclusion is that when explained thoroughly students will take the opportunity in the spirit in which it is given. Cooperation was not unanimous, neither was participation, but as time went on, and the class saw itself shape the learning process, faith in an experiment grew into acceptance. For a majority of the students, about eight of eleven, the Quality Circle seems to have delivered more than they had expected.

For a few students acceptance was slower in coming, it may not be there yet; however, some of their reluctance may be explained by the type of school they are attending. At Valley Forge, students,as well as instructors, are uniformed. The Corps of Cadets marches to meals to the strains of martial music. Our school day breaks at twelve noon and resumes at one-thirty, thirteen-thirty for the initiated. This presented a problem in the application of the QC, because unlike Dr. Hirshfield at Penn State Ogontz, I could not meet with my students on their lunch hour. Several members of the class were also in the Band which lives in a different dormitory, or barracks, from the other class members who live in the Junior College, or F Company barracks; this made it impossible to hold nightly meetings of the Circle. So we were limited to classroom time which has inherent drawbacks. Since class time was going to be used in a new and unfamiliar way about four out of twelve students in the first semester, and three of eleven in the second, have expressed reservations concerning the amount of classroom time that is sometimes used to arrive at a consensus. As far as they are concerned,this is time which would otherwise have been used in lectures or discussions.

These reservations revolved around the expectations of students who attend a school wich is otherwise highly structured, but my guess is that almost anyone who employs the QC during class periods will encounter some of the same criticisms. One of the class members is taking the course for advanced placement and is cross-enrolled in the Academy and he has expressed a certain degree of difficulting in adjusting to the latitude which the QC allows. When asked to critique the experience of a semester and a half, he wrote that this was not a "typical" college course. As far as he was concerned, in his "college course...the professor know's what best, not the students."

This approximated the views of two others in the class; both of whom are also reserved, do not usually take part in discussion unless called upon by the instructor, and all three refer to themselves as reserved in one form or another. One of the other less than loquacious members of the class feels that he has benefited more from discussions than the more conventional lecture format. Remember, too, that at the beginning of the semester, the class, meeting as circle, had already had the opportunity to determine the structure of the course. At this point, I should point out that as facilitator, or moderator, I felt that the class had reached a legitimate consensus. In September, the consensus was for twice-weekly lecture and discussion in the remaining period. In the Spring semester, however, the circle reached at least a tentative consensus for two discussion periods and one day of lecture. Those among us who prefer to lecture may feel that this is a less than desirable result. Recently, the circle opted to fine-tune discussions. Reached over parts of two circle-sessions (about everysix periods), the circle concluded that I should provide the class with written reading and discussion questions. The students arrived at this course following an open-ended question of mine as to how to increase participation. My goal for this experiment was 100% participation in classroom discussion; there is

already nearly 100% participation in the circle. This suggestion to provide discussion questions came from one of the reticent members of the class, interestingly enough. The excellence of the idea points out the serious thought that went into the diagnosis, and it was immediately seized upon by the other members of the circle. The questions will resemble those I had given the class for their take-home quizzes in the first semester when that was part of their agenda. Some students pointed out that such discussion and review questions would provide an opportunity for their more reserved colleagues to join in the discussion while they were simultaneously directing the class along, what they perceived to be, a firmer, more scholarly approach.

Concerning the overall decision of the circle to have two discussion sections as opposed to one as in the previous semester, one member of the class made the following observation: "when a person can argue a subject... he will...come to know it better than if it were simply dictated to him...." He went on to add that the class was only as good as the individuals who made it up, and their individual effort within the group. This seems fairly obvious, but also in its own delightful way fairly inscrutable. It is a perfect summation of what the experiment tought me over the last six months, but since it comes from one of my students, rather than from me, it seems just that much more rewarding. It makes the entire experiment a success, as far as I am concerned, because it has brought the course truly into the control of the people for whom it is intended - the students themselves.

Part of the resistance from the silent-minority, if I dare refer to them in that way, was that too much of what passed for discussion was mere "prattle" or "supposition." Frankly, I had gone home many days greatly enthused over the quality and quantity of discussion; however, the QC brought me down to earth, and I did not have to wait for the biennial student-course evaluations. It was greatly encouraging to me to note that once again the

thrust of the criticism was constructive and seen as a positive improvement by the class. As a direct result, the class has now moved into a slightly different phase in in second-half of the semester.

At the same meeting of the circle, consensus was reached on a change of venue. For six months we had been meeting in a large lecture hall, occupying the first two rows in order to be closer together, until one of the students turned around to face his peers in the second row, and someone suggested we find another place to meet. Subsequently, we have moved to a large, oak seminar table in the Baker Library Conference Room which was adopted despite the distance from one point on the campus to another.

Over several circle-sessions, the members of the class also decided to have essay examinations for their graded work; these would consist of a midterm and a final examination. The circle had discussed several alternatives over the two semesters, ranging from daily quizzes to none at all. We also discussed and rejected open-notebook examinations, multiple-choice tests, and a system of two testing or control groups; at present the students may opt for a research paper. At a later circle meeting, the class agreed to an oral history project consisting of an interview of their grandparents or family friends who lived through the Great Depression and World War II. This will become the major outside project for the class.

The oral history project had been my idea but I put it forward to the circle as an alternative to a book review or research paper. It was an idea that I had tried before in the American survey course, but one that I ultimately discarded after concluding its major drawback was devoting the time to survey the results by listening to the tapes of the interviews. When I told the circle about this aspect,and we discussed it, the suggestion arose that each student write a synopsis of his interview for circulation to the group, and we could discuss the results as a group.

Here is just another example of a positive, creative suggestion coming as a result of the QC technique; a suggestion which will make the course more enriching. It is exactly what the QC is designed to accomplish.

As a matter of fact, even though not all of the class members might want to admit it to one another, individual members have been helpful to one another especially involving the one arbitrary assignment, the chapter bibliography. Each student receives a chapter for which he is responsible for preparing an alphabetized bibliography, or reading list, to supplement the text. It is designed to aid future students, to give necessary experience with the card catalog, and very shortly it will go into the school's computer. So the students know they are preparing something which will outlast them and they tend to take it seriously, however, not all of them are as adept as some others. When some suggested I provide them with some helpful hints I passed out a bibliography guide in the second semester; in the first semester I had wondered what I had been doing wrong.

Another thing the QC has done is to change my approach to teaching. I have found that I had to get over my innate compulsion to lecture every period. For the last thirteen years I had either been taking or preparing notes, and I judged the quality of my instruction by the thickness of my students' notebooks. When the circle opted for a fifty percent reduction in lectures I began to rethink my role. Aside from dropping the security-blanket lecturing provides, I had only two problems with the class which I hoped the QC technique could solve.

These two issues were arriving at total participation and prompt completion of assignments, both of which have been alluded to above. Since instituting the QC concept my classroom participation has increased from about 30% to approximately 73%, or eight out of eleven. Somedays, depending on the subject, there has been almost total participation which goes beyond anything I had taken part in since graduate school.

In an attempt to get at the heart of the participation aspect -- why some talked and some did not -- I asked the class meeting as the QC, what attitudes they tolerated and which they didnot. (I had a suspicion that exhuberance was not as well tolerated as silence, but, moreover, I wanted to hear what they would say.) During this period, the circle came to resemble a Communist Chinese "Circle of Ten." The Communists have long used the Circle of Ten to have free-flowing, seemingly open-ended, but pointed discussions of mutual concerns and problems of ten selected bureaucrats or managers of their collective farms and factories.

Once I had asked the question about behavior which they tolerated, as opposed to that which was not, the atmosphere changed almost instantly. There was an electric uneasiness present among the group, a heightening of emotion, as well as intellect. Since a goodly percentage of the class are advanced ROTC students, Valley Forge has a Senior Reserve Officer Training Corps detachment which leads to a commission in the Army in two years, several members picked up almost intuitively on what was taking place. Within a matter of moments, most of the circle, if not all, knew that this was "Self-Examination", a moment of truth. Now they were all alone amongst each other -- a strange feeling. They knew the method had been used for brain washing in Korea and Vietnam and that some of the more infamous religious cults also employ it regularly.

It was the most productive session of the six-month experiment. During the period several members of the class who choose to remain silent spoke out to justify their behavior, and furthermore to question the validity of their colleagues' historical opinions, hinting that much of the discussion was too open-ended; that, of course, was an oblique criticism of the facilitator. Out of this discussion came the mid-course correction, to borrow a NASA phrase. Now, I would be charge with the wrapping up, or

summarizing discussion at the end of each period, rather than at the beginning; in other words, the circle expected the instructor to put open-ended discussion into context after the class had been able to maximize participation. Again this is further example of the spirit of the comments made throughout the experiment with the QC. The group moved to a higher level as a result of implied criticism from an individual. Once again it demonstrates that the whole can become greater than the sum of its parts. Some might find the criticism threatening, but for me the encouraging thing was the spirit in which it was offered. the maturity which it required, and the atmosphere which it demonstrated. Clearly, these college freshmen have begun to see that criticism need not be value laden to be successful; in fact, it is better if it is not. The point that I want to make is that the QC technique is one which we owe to ourselves as educators and administrators to adopt. In the liberal arts and social sciences, it is a program which holds out the promise of its own reward.

In conclusion, the ramifications of the experiment bode well for the class, both for the individuals and the group. I believe that the QC has encouraged a higher level of participation, a seriousness of purpose, which would not have existed had it not been in place. Most of all it has removed a very large percentage of the onerous and arbitrary which has always clouded the relationship between student and teacher. Through the arrival of a group consensus via the QC, the class has shared responsibility, exchanged thoughts and ideas, encouraged scholarship, and come together as a group. The members of my QC have only their own brief educational experiences to judge the experiment against. We who have a somewhat longer experience know that it is important to teach the student as well as the subject. In my opinion, the QC technique teaches students to teach them-

selves,and one another, even as a few twist under the strain that necessary leeway seems to impose upon them. I think it has made for a better class and a better course; I am convinced it has taught me more about teaching than I expected.

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